DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 957 CE 085 211

AUTHOR	Hughes, Jason
TITLE	The Learning Organisation Part I. The Learning Organisation: What Is It? Does It Constitute a Useful Set of Ideas for the Human Resource Development Practitioner? CLMS Working Paper.
REPORT NO	No-29
PUB DATE	2000-12-00
NOTE	15p.; Produced by Leicester University, Centre for Labour Market Studies.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.clms.le.ac.uk/publications/wkpapers/work_paperNo29.pdf .
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Career Development; *Cooperative Learning; Educational Theories; Group Activities; Group Dynamics; *Group Experience; Innovation; Interpersonal Competence; *Labor Force Development; Models; Organizational Culture; *Organizational Development; Organizational Effectiveness; Organizational Objectives; Postsecondary Education; Social Development; *Systems Approach; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Collaborative Learning; Human Resource Specialists; Human Resources Professionals; *Learning Organizations; Mental Models; *Organizational Learning; Team Learning

ABSTRACT

The learning organization is one that has a strategy of continuous organizational change, exploring and facilitating a link between the development of the organization and the personal development of the employee. These five disciplines lead the innovation of learning organizations: systems thinking (meaning the whole is more than the sum of the parts); personal mastery or proficiency; mental models or ways of seeing and understanding; building shared visions; and team learning. One limit to the learning organization concept is the assumption that organizations have an existence in and of themselves beyond the level of individuals and can 'learn'. The implications for human resources development encompass the entire scope of the field. A more useful conceptualization is that of organizational learning, in which people learn from each other in a mutually beneficial manner. This assumes that under the right conditions people are able to learn more effectively in groups. Individual learning and organizational learning are different levels of an ongoing process involving knowledge sharing, building, adapting, and development as part of a group. (SLR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 478 957

The Learning Organisation Part I

The Learning Organisation: what is it? Does it constitute a useful set of ideas for the human resource development practitioner?

Jason Hughes
December 2000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
B. Jennings
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
1

Address for Correspondence:
Centre for Labour Market Studies
University of Leicester
7-9 Salisbury Road
Leicester LE1 7QR

Tel: (UK) 0116-252-5950
Fax: (UK) 0116-252-5953

email: jason.hughes@le.ac.uk

CE 085 211

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

'The learning organisation' has achieved great prominence over the last decade or so, particularly within the training and development literature, but also more widely within management and organisational studies. This paper aims to provide a coherent exposition of what is meant by the term, and to consider whether the concepts involved constitute yet another transient 'fad' to add to a growing list of fashionable ideas which are enthusiastically embraced before rapidly disappearing. Also considered are the questions of whether there is anything particularly 'new' about the ideas involved, and the extent to which the term points towards a set of ideas useful to the human resource development (henceforth HRD) practitioner. Is argued that at its conceptual base 'the learning organisation' suffers from a number of conceptual flaws (these are examined in some depth), and that practitioners need to have an awareness of these limitations before using the 'learning organisation' to inform their work. An alternative conceptualisation of 'organisational learning' is developed in critical response to key learning organisation literature and its tendency to 'reify' 'the organisation' as though it had a 'real' existence beyond the level of the human beings that constitute it.

Introduction

'The learning organisation' has achieved great prominence over the last decade or so, particularly within the training and development literature, but also more widely within management and organisational studies. This paper aims to provide a coherent exposition of what is meant by the term, and to consider whether the concepts involved constitute yet another transient 'fad' to add to a growing list of fashionable ideas which are enthusiastically embraced before rapidly disappearing. Also considered are the questions of whether there is anything particularly 'new' about the ideas involved, and the extent to which the term points towards a set of ideas useful to the human resource development (henceforth HRD) practitioner. Is argued that at its conceptual base 'the learning organisation' suffers from a number of conceptual flaws (these are examined in some depth), and that practitioners need to have an awareness of these limitations before using the 'learning organisation' to inform their work.

The paper begins with an extensive explication of what is meant by the learning organisation. The intention here is to focus on the perspectives of main proponents of the concept before analysing some of the theoretical problems with it. Examples of the difficulties of 'operationalising' the ideas involved shall also be considered before the paper's conclusion in which an attempt is made to reformulate the central concept of 'organisational learning' such that this might provide a more adequate basis for HRD practice.

The Learning Organisation

While it has been suggested that the antecedents of what we mean when we talk about the learning organisation date back to the 1920s (Jones and Hendry, 1992), there is general consensus that its emergence as a topic for consideration has predominantly grown out writings which have appeared since the late 1980s. This is not to suggest that the learning organisation as a concept is simply a product of that time period. Rather, a combination of ideas, theories and practices, some of which may have been around for some considerable time, have been gathered under the rubric of the learning organisation. Indeed, notwithstanding Sir Christopher Ball's somewhat dismissive contention that the learning organisation may be 'just another label for good practice' [1] (Jones and Hendry, 1992: 3), there are indications that it may become more than a passing fad. Whether it survives to fulfil Lessem's prediction that it will become the cornerstone of successful economies well into the twenty-first century (Lessem, 1991), remains to be seen. However, it is evident that since the mid-to-late 1990s the ideas relating to knowledge management appear to be gaining ascendance while those relating to the learning organisation are in decline.

As may be expected, given the upsurge of interest in the concept and the proliferation of literature, numerous attempts have been made to define the learning organisation. For example, Pedler, Boydell and

1 As we shall see when we consider the work of Senge (1990), this statement appears to be based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of what is being proposed by advocates of the learning organization.

Burgoyne (1988), who prefer the term 'learning company', define it as '... an organisation which facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself' (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell, 1988: 1). Other authors have described it as:

> One where training and personal development are an integral part of the organisation and where learning is a continuous process, rather than being a bolted-on activity at various points in an individual's career.
>
> (Barnham, Fraser and Heath 1988: 12)

A common characteristic of most interpretations of the learning organisation is that there should be a coherent strategy of continuous organisational change: one which centres on exploring and facilitating a link between the development of the organisation and the personal development of employees (this will be explained in more detail in relation to Senge's (1990) work, discussed below). Furthermore, most conceptualisations of the learning organisation point towards a new kind of workplace learning – a move towards what Argyris and Schön (1978) would term 'deutero-learning'.

To clarify: Argyris and Schön distinguish between three types of learning: *single-loop learning*, *double-loop learning* and *deutero-learning*. These terms can be defined in the following way:

The first form of learning, *single-loop learning*, is the most common and 'familiar' form in Argyris and Schön's typology. It is the form which involves the least disruption to 'things as they are' within organisations. At the most basic level, this term refers to 'survival learning' – learning standard operations, learning to detect errors, to correct errors, and learning to return things to a 'normal' state. Single-loop learning thus serves to reproduce existing norms, values, and practices.

The second kind of learning – *double-loop learning* – is crucial for any organisation that wishes to adapt to changes in the external environment. Essentially, this term refers to 'adaptive' learning: learning which is based upon challenging existing organisational norms, values and practices, and on questioning procedures in a way that facilitates organisational flexibility – an organisation's responsiveness to change.

At the highest level of Argyris and Schön's typology is *deutero-learning*, we could term this 'generative learning': this refers to an organisation's ability to develop the capacity to pre-empt changes in the external environment, an organisation's capacity to *learn how to learn* and its ability to sustain that process. As Hawkins (1991) proposes, deutero-learning is made possible when individuals within an organisation begin to use insights gained from single-loop and double-loop learning to 'reframe' and to 'reconceptualise' the issues that they face (Taylor, 1994: 20).
These distinctions help us to understand what is being called for by proponents of the learning organisation: a fundamental shift in attitudes to learning, not just to fulfil short-term skills gaps, but to engage in *learning to learn*, to engage in learning which encourages innovation, learning which enables a more proactive outlook by organisations.

It is in this connection that we can observe how the notion of the learning organisation is intimately associated with, and may even be a product of, a whole variety of widespread shifts in corporate thinking, strategy and practice, which are impacting upon or being pursued by, a growing number of organisations. This is particularly the case for large organisations operating in international markets. Thus, the adoption of notions such as organisational learning and the inculcation of a 'learning culture' within the organisation can be seen as being a necessary accompaniment to the restructuring of the organisation, possibly incorporating flatter hierarchies wherein co-operative working is essential (Kanter, 1990) – a more

advanced stage in the development of HRM more generally. It may also be associated with the learning imperative imposed on many organisations by the rapid pace of technological change, or with the desire to achieve performance gains through enhanced quality assurance.

The Characteristics of The Learning Organisation

Several different models of the learning organisation have been proposed, reflecting, perhaps, either the fact that the concept is in an early stage of development and articulation, or that the term is being used to encapsulate a number of disparate ideas.

By far the most significant and influential piece of writing from within the learning organisation literature is Peter Senge's (1990) text *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organisation*. Senge begins by defining learning organisations as '... organisations where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together' (Senge 1990: 3).

In this manner, Senge spells out the *ideal* of the learning organisation. As such, the learning organisation should not be considered to constitute a model of 'best practice', but rather, as a set of ideal organisational characteristics to which we (as practitioners) should progressively aspire. Thus, it is important to note, Senge is pointing towards the need for all organisations to embark upon a journey of continuous improvement, one which, by definition, will have no real 'ending point'. Indeed, *pace* the previously quoted statement from Sir Christopher Ball, a central part of Senge's argument involves the contention that we should move away from a pre-occupation with ending points, with 'snapshots' – away from a predominance of simplistic two-dimensional models of best practice, and towards much more holistic 'systems' thinking. That is to say: that we should move towards an understanding of the inter-connectedness of 'events' throughout time and space. It is this 'systems thinking' that constitutes the key to achieving the ideal of the learning organisation. As Senge defines it, an overarching 'systems thinking' is the fifth of five emergent 'disciplines' which are leading to the 'innovation' (or the developmental realisation) of learning organisations.

In using the term 'disciplines' Senge is referring simultaneously to 'ways of understanding' and 'ways of doing'. He is referring to bodies of theory which have developed over the last few decades, and to the practical 'tools' which have accompanied and have grown out of these conceptual developments. A discipline is, therefore, a 'developmental path' to greater proficiency (1990: 10). Senge proposes that while some of the five disciplines – *systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning* – may originally have developed separately and are the collective product of many different people, they are increasingly *converging* to create learning organisations. Senge is not entirely clear about what he means in this connection. It appears that he is at once pointing towards a process that is happening of its own accord – where the various 'disciplines' he refers to are, as a matter of course, increasingly being integrated by practitioners within organisations – and, at the same time, Senge is providing exposition of the ideas and practices which practitioners *need* to adopt in order to set themselves on the path towards becoming learning organisations. In this sense, Senge's efforts can be best understood as an attempt to *identify* and to *catalyse* a set of processes which, to some extent, are already underway. In fact, Senge sees the realisation of the five disciplines as being central to the future success of all

organisations. He writes: 'The organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels in an organisation' (1990: 4).

Let us now consider in more detail exactly what Senge means by each of the five disciplines he identifies.

Systems Thinking

In essence, systems thinking is very much like *gestalt* psychology. It involves the central idea that 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. That is to say: we cannot understand a whole system by focusing solely on its isolated constituents. Senge is proposing that systems thinking involves the recognition and conceptual accommodation of the fact that all things are inter-connected and inter-dependent. For example, one can recognise that a darkened sky, a tree's leaves curling upwards, and a distant rumble are characteristic changes which accompany the development of a storm. These 'events' will, in turn, eventually lead to a rise in underground water reserves, etc. We understand the system that these 'events' are part of. We understand their inter-connectedness. Thus, we can only really understand the 'system' of a thunderstorm if we understand it as a *whole* (1990: 7). Furthermore, many of the 'systems' that we encounter in day-to-day life have become so deeply entrenched that we no longer 'see' them. Consider, the following example: if an adult person from a contemporary industrialised western society was asked to list a few animals he or she might well suggest something like: cats, dogs, horses, pigs, lions. He or she might also be able to spot the odd one out from this list – lions – since lions are wild animals whilst the others in this list are domesticated animals. It would be 'second nature' to list animals in this manner – according to species – and to employ *systems* of classification (according to biological characteristics, according to domestication, etc.) without really giving the matter a great deal of thought. However, consider the following extract taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopedia in which animals are listed as follows:

> ...animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.
>
> (Taken from Foucault 1970: 21–22)

To many present-day western readers the above passage is very strange indeed. It makes no immediate 'sense', it is perhaps even comical. The reader is forced to question the logic behind the manner in which animals are listed. The classificatory system involved is foreign to 'us', it would seem to belong to an entirely different way of looking at the world: to another time and place. In fact, in order to understand the system employed in the quotation above, the reader would need to build an understanding of the broader set of social relationships from which this writing emerged. In short, in order properly to understand this small fragment of a total system of thinking, the present day reader would need to have a more complete understanding of the whole: of the historical, social, cultural and linguistic systems/processes involved.

In the same way, businesses and other organisations are systems of human relationships. These systems, very often, are invisible to the people that comprise them, and might only become apparent to a greater degree when a very different organisation – a very different relational system – is encountered in day-to-day interaction. Over the last fifty years, Senge argues, we have begun to develop concepts which aim to accommodate the systemic character of organisations. We have begun increasingly to realise this characteristic, and to build a body of knowledge which is attuned to understanding overall patterns of change within organisations so that we may develop tools which enable us to control and steer these changes more effectively. Senge proposes that systems thinking lies at the heart of the overall change in thinking that is required within learning organisations. He makes the very interesting point that since the

'whole system' is very often obscured from people within organisations, these people often have 'learning horizons'. He writes: 'We learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions' (1990: 23). Thus, a central part of what is involved in the development of learning organisations is the *elucidation* of total systems, this is only possible if we make people aware of the (positive or negative) consequences of their actions, and of where they fit into the 'bigger picture'.

Personal Mastery

Senge firstly points out that mastery does not necessarily mean 'dominance over', it can simply mean *proficiency*. Personal mastery involves the ability consistently to realise personal objectives 'the results that matter most deeply to [us]' (1990: 7). People who have achieved personal mastery would, by definition, be firmly committed to their own continuous development: to 'lifelong learning'.

Senge therefore sees personal mastery as a long-term process rather than as a static 'snapshot' or a 'state'. It is, he proposes, a continuous process, one in which we identify those objectives which we hold to be the most important, and one which involves a discipline of 'deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively' (1990: 7). Real personal mastery thus involves a process of 'living our lives in the service of our highest aspirations' (1990: 8). Senge considers personal mastery to be the 'cornerstone' of any learning organisation, to be the 'spiritual foundation' upon which learning organisations are built since 'An organisation's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members' (1990: 7). Senge proposes that few organisations actually encourage the 'personal mastery' of their people. Over time, organisations will most commonly deaden the enthusiasm and energy of those who join them; will lead individuals to forget their highest aspirations; and will, paradoxically, actively promote an *instrumental* workforce. According to Senge, the key to overcoming this problem resides in exploring and resolving the hinge 'between personal learning and organisational learning' (1990: 8).

Mental Models

By the term 'mental models', Senge is referring to deeply entrenched 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of understanding'. He proposes that there are many advantages to be had from identifying, recognising and understanding such mental models. Royal Dutch Shell is, he suggests, a good example of an organisation which has secured major competitive advantage from realising the pervasiveness of 'hidden mental models'. He hints that such understandings have helped these companies to 'manage unpredictability'. In a (1995) interview, Senge provides a little more detail about *how* Royal Dutch Shell was able to draw upon the ideas involved with the concept of the learning organisation to enhance their competitiveness. He states:

> Royal Dutch Shell, the parent of all Shell Oil companies, did this in the early 1970s before the OPEC oil embargoes. Shell redesigned its planning process as a learning process based on two key principles: first that the learner determines what he or she wants to learn and, second, that learning always proceeds from the understanding of the learner, not the teacher. Planning became focused on surfacing and improving tacit mental models. As a result, when the first embargo hit, Shell's managers saw a long-term shift in the oil business and increased control to its local operating companies. The companies could then better adapt to the political reactions to the oil shock within their individual countries. This was one of the several changes which caused Shell to outperform its competitors during the 1970s and 1980s.
>
> (Senge 1995: 26)

In this way, we can see how the ideas related to the learning organisation are intimately related to broader shifts in HRD strategy: shifts which encourage higher levels of learner-centredness, and which place great emphasis on the development of problem-solving skills.

Senge proposes that discovering mental models necessarily begins with an introspective analysis of how we see the world. The process then involves an open scrutiny, an 'exposition', of these models. He hints that such a process will allow us to remove the obstructions to 'learningful' conversations with one another. By this he means 'conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others' (1990: 9). It is here that Senge is pointing towards a process in which people could recognise and accommodate differences in how they see the world, differences in their learning styles, differences in the ways they express themselves, a process which could identify both individual sensitivities and common ground, a process which would, ultimately, allow for much more effective knowledge-building *dialogue* between people.

Building Shared Visions

As Senge proposes, a pervasive theme in ideas concerning leadership is the importance of a shared vision. Indeed, some of the most successful organisations have organised themselves around a coherent vision shared by all their members. For example, IBM – 'service'; Polaroid – 'instant photography'; Ford Motors – 'transportation for the masses'; Federal Express – 'logistics'; Apple – 'user friendliness' (1990: 9).

A genuine shared vision, Senge states, is one that people aspire to because they 'want to', not because they are 'told to'. It involves *commitment* not *compliance*. Senge is most interested in how it is possible to turn a personal vision into a shared vision (and *vice versa)*. He proposes that such a process necessarily involves 'unearthing' 'pictures of the future' (1990: 9) – visions of how it *could* be and how it *should* be. In order for anyone to achieve this, he argues, one must first recognise the futility of trying to '*dictate*' a vision (1990: 9). Thus, with the disciplines of 'personal mastery' and 'building shared visions' we can observe a central theme of Senge's work: the need to synthesise 'organisational' and 'individual' aspirations as a prerequisite for learning organisations.

Team Learning

The discipline of team learning involves a notion of collective development. As Senge writes:

> We know that teams can learn; in sports, in the performing arts, in science, and even, occasionally, in business, there are striking examples where the intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in the team, and where teams develop extraordinary capacities for co-ordinated action. When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise (1990: 10)

Again, this notion of team learning involves the central *gestalt* principle of (quite literally) 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. Senge proposes that team learning begins with 'dialogue' which involves 'suspending assumptions' to reach a 'genuine' 'thinking together' (1990: 10). Such a process can be seen to involve, for example, identifying one's own prejudices, overcoming personal defensiveness, overcoming embarrassment; it can involve the recognition of 'patterns of interaction' which would otherwise obstruct exchanges that could lead to collective learning. Again, we can observe the inter-connectedness of this discipline with the discipline of 'uncovering our mental models' as described above. One could point to a whole range of 'tools' which could facilitate the process that Senge points towards: for example, neuro-

linguistic programming, conversational/transactional analysis, cultural awareness tools, psychoanalysis, counselling techniques, etc.

Senge clearly states that it is crucial for these five disciplines to develop as an 'ensemble' (1990: 12). It is, to reiterate the point made earlier, for this reason that he labels systems thinking as the *fifth discipline*: as the unifying, over-arching discipline that unites all the others.

In sum, Senge proposes:

> At the heart of a learning organisation is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our actions create the problems we experience. A learning organisation is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it. As Archimedes has said, "Give me a lever long enough ... and single-handed I can move the world" (1990: 12–13)

It is easy to see why Senge's work has been so influential. He writes very enthusiastically; sometimes with an almost evangelical zeal. Indeed, his use of language such as 'spiritual foundation', 'developmental paths' and 'uncovering the real' is, in many ways, unusual for a text of this kind. He makes some very interesting observations, some of which unite seemingly disparate themes from within the academic and practitioner-oriented literature. He also appears to offer a coherent way forward for organisations which seek to secure competitive advantage through people development.

Conceptual Limitations

There are, nonetheless, a number of problems with Senge's work, and indeed, with many of the subsequent ideas relating to the learning organisation. By far the most significant problem resides at a quite fundamental conceptual level. Senge's theorisations of *collective learning* of *team learning*, of *organisational intelligence* involve a *reification* of the organisation. That is to say, through conceiving of 'the organisation' as *in itself* engaging in 'learning', as 'having' an intelligence of its own, he gives it (the organisation, that is) an existence *in and of itself*, an existence beyond the level of the individuals who are the units of its constitution. This is something which is quite different from proposing that the 'whole is more than the sum of its parts'. To clarify, while it is one thing to claim that one cannot properly understand a system if one does not conceive of it as a whole, and that organisational change cannot be reduced to isolated individual actions, it is another implicitly to claim that the organisation has an existence *beyond the level of human beings*. It is almost as if the organisation had 'a life of its own'. Such a formulation is highly problematic.

This fundamental conceptual flaw in Senge's work leads to a series of further problems. To use academic language: throughout the text he 'oscillates' between a 'voluntarist' and 'structuralist' position. That is to say, in one instance he claims that reality can be 'created' 'voluntarily': 'people are continually discovering how they create their reality' (a *voluntarist* position), and in another instance, he views organisations as *real* structures which *have* an existence beyond the level of individuals (and beyond the level of individual will), for example, he writes that 'there are striking examples where the intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in the team' (a *structuralist* position[2]). He is keen to

2 In the sense that the total structure, the "organization" or "team" can be considered to be ontologically distinct from the individuals that compose it

promote a move away from a view of problems as caused by something 'out there', and yet he gives 'organisations' and 'teams' an 'out there' existence.

These inherent contradictions lead to difficulties in putting Senge's ideas into practice. The *voluntarism* in his work (i.e. that we can create the conditions of our own actions; that we can *create* reality) might lead the practitioner towards believing that a mere act of will is enough to change fundamentally the 'organisation', and, moreover might lead the practitioner to neglect how factors external to the organisation *which are outside of the practitioner's control*, nonetheless, profoundly influence the direction of organisational change. As has been extensively documented within the social sciences, factors such as gender, social class and ethnicity can greatly impede learning in the workplace. Organisations involve highly complex processes of change. The direction of change within, say a business organisation is influenced by much broader processes at the national and global level, by changes in the market, by the complex interplay of formal and informal relationships between people at all levels of its workforce, etc. While it may be possible to *steer* the overall direction of change that an organisation undergoes, it is rather misleading to propose that one could, by act of will, 'think an alternative organisational reality into existence'. Conversely, the *structuralist* trait in Senge's work might lead practitioners towards a futile search for evidence of 'an organisation' with 'its own supra-individual existence' 'having learned something'.

At a more pragmatic level, a major problem with the ideal of the 'learning organisation' is that it demands that senior management within organisations have an almost boundless faith in the value of continuous development. Moreover, it gives the practitioner few tools with which to assess the extent to which investment in development has improved organisational competitiveness.

Implications for HRD Practice

From the discussion presented above, one can conclude that advocates of the position are not simply proposing that learning organisations are those which are simply 'doing lots of training' or are 'engaging in a lot of employee development'. It will very much depend upon the *character* and *content* of that training and development: whether it leads to *real,* generative learning, whether it helps both 'organisations' and 'individuals' simultaneously to move closer to realising their highest aspirations, etc. Indeed, advocates of the learning organisation are keen to shift emphasis away from 'training' and 'development' *per se* towards a more direct engagement with *learning* itself

The implications of this position, if taken to its logical conclusion, are that our whole understanding of what HRD means and entails must change. If we consider, once again, Senge's work, it would follow that training and development might take the form of 'learningful conversations', of 'group dialogues'. The work of the trainer or human resource manager might become more centrally concerned with aiming to eradicate the boundaries to 'group learning' (in as far as this might be possible); to 'marry up' organisational and individual aspirations; to elucidate and to resolve 'deeply' held conflicts, perhaps those residing in our 'mental models'. In short, the work of the practitioner would be continuously to manage, to organise and to balance the relationships between employees so as to best facilitate generative learning. Furthermore, Senge is pointing towards the need for practitioners to discover their own organisational systems, and to make these actively clear to members of the organisation in such a way that people are able to see the consequences of their actions. He is thus pointing towards the need for practitioners to *expand* 'learning horizons': perhaps even to make people more accountable for their actions.

In this context, an activity such as performance appraisal would involve elucidating the 'total system' that any particular employee was involved within. That is to say, identifying where an individual is located within the organisation's structure, how this position has changed over time, and how it is likely to change in the future. In keeping with Senge's idea that, while we learn best from experience, the consequences of our actions within organisations are often not visible to us, it might involve explicitly spelling out the consequences (both intended and unintended) of a person's actions, over time and throughout the organisation – that is to say, *as a part of the total system*. Performance appraisal, to take just one example, would thus be understood to be more of a means to facilitate adaptive learning by enabling people to 'see the bigger picture', than a means of controlling the workforce (in any simple sense). The ideas relating to the learning organisation therefore have quite radical implications for the practitioner.

Conclusion

As we have seen, a central idea involved in the concept of the learning organisation is that of *organisational* or *team learning*. It has been argued that these terms are highly problematic as they lead one to conceive of the organisation as having a *real* existence all of its own: of an organisation *itself* having the equivalent of a human 'mind' which is capable of 'learning'. This, in turn, leads us to conceive of 'organisational learning' and 'individual learning' as two *ontologically* distinct things (that is to say, two things which are, 'in reality' distinct, not just 'conceptually' distinct[3]). Following on from this conceptualisation, we are left asking questions such as 'what is the *relationship between* organisational learning and individual learning', a question which is flawed from the outset.

Therefore, offered here is a potentially more useful conceptualisation of what is currently referred to as 'organisational learning', one which has more *cognitive value* (Elias 1978), one which is less confusing, and less misleading. It is argued here that when proponents of the learning organisation refer to 'organisational learning' they are actually referring to *an ideal process in which people are learning from one another in a mutually beneficial manner. They are learning in a way which helps them simultaneously to achieve both their 'own' goals and the goals of the broader organisation to which they belong. It refers to the fact that, under the right conditions, people are able to learn more effectively as part of a group than they can on their own.* Consider, for example, a 'brainstorming' session where a group of people come together to solve a particular problem. If the group's *interaction* is managed well, the ideas from different members of the group can become combined, developed, amended, synthesised, built upon, such that the *collective* 'knowledge output' at the end of the session could be greater than any of the single *individual* inputs of members of the group. The collective output of a brainstorming session is greater, not because it involves a greater *number* of ideas (if it were simply a sum total of all the individual inputs from members of the group – say, just a list of isolated ideas – then no real 'brainstorming' will have taken place), rather, it is likely to be greater if the ideas, insights, observations – the contributions – of members of the group have developed *in relation to* one another. If successful, members of the group will have developed further, will have learned more effectively, will have come closer to solving the problem, than they would have done had they attempted to do so on their own. In the same way, through an ongoing process of

3 In as far as it is possible to sustain any simple division between "reality" and "our concepts of reality" (or ontology and epistemology).

reflexively combining insights and observations, reviewing practices, sharing experiences, synthesising and 'operationalising' ideas as part of a group, it may be possible for the individuals who form an organisation to have higher degrees of success when attempting to *adapt* to changes in the broader environment.

Thus, in short, the terms 'individual learning' and 'organisational learning' actually refer to 'two sides of the same coin': they simply refer to different levels of an ongoing process involving knowledge sharing, knowledge building, knowledge adaptation, and knowledge development as part of a group. It is in this connection that the concept of the learning organisation is most similar to that of 'knowledge management'. However, a comparison of these two sets of ideas is somewhat outside of the scope of this paper.

While the observations developed above cannot be considered to constitute a 'guide to strategy' as such for practitioners aiming to make use of the ideas relating to the learning organisation, they are offered here to promote a critical awareness of both the key problems and the potentially valuable contributions of this increasingly popular concept.

Bibliography

Argyris, C and Schön, D (1978) *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley.

Ashton, D A and Jones, L (1997) 'The Fragility of the Learning Process: The Impact of Organisational Structure and Practices on Learning in the Workplace', unpublished paper.

Baird, L and Meshoulam, I (1988) 'Managing Two Fits of Strategic Human Resource Management', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 13,No.1, 116-28.

Beer, M *et al* (1984) *Managing Human Assets*, New York: Free Press.

Bennett, R. (1991) *Organisational Behaviour*, London: Longman.

Bridge, H and Salt, H (1992) *Access and Delivery in Continuing Education and Training*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham and Department of Employment.

Boxall, P (1993) 'The significance of human resource management: a reconsideration of the evidence', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 4, no. 3, September.

Dearden, G (1989) *Learning While Earning: Learning Contracts for Employers*, Learning from Experience Trust.

Elias, N (1978) *What is Sociology?*, London: Hutchinson.

Foucault, M (1970) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage

Garratt, B (1994) *The Learning Organisation*, Harper Collins: London (revised edition).
Handy, C (1994) *The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future*, London: Hutchinson.

Hawkins, P (1991) 'The Spiritual Dimension of the Learning Organisation', in *Management Education and Development*, 22 (3).

Honey, P (1991) 'The Learning organisation simplified', *Training and Development*, July 1991.

Hougham, J, Thomas, J and Sisson, K (1991) 'Ford's EDAP scheme: a roundtable discussion', in *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 77-91.

Industrial Relations Services (1993) *Employee Development Bulletin*, January.

Jones, A M and Hendry, C (1992) *The Learning Organisation: A Review of Literature and Practice*, Human Resource Development Partnership.

Jones, H G (1991) 'Motivation for Higher Performance at Volvo', in *Long Range Planning*, Vol 24, No. 5.

Kanter, R M (1990) *When Giants Learn To Dance*, London: Unwin Hyman.

Klein, J A, Edge, G M and Kass, T (1991) 'Skill-Based Competition', in *Journal of General Management*, 14 (4) Summer, pp. 1-15.

Legge, K (1991) 'Human Resource Management: A Critical Analysis', *New Perspectives on Human Resource Management* (ed.) John Storey, Routledge.

Lessem, R (1991) *Total Quality Learning: Building a Learning Organisation,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lundy, O & Cowling, A (1996) *Strategic Human Resource Management*, London: Routledge.

Maguire, M and Horrocks, B (1995) *Employee Development Programmes and Lifetime Learning,* Centre for Labour Market Studies Working Paper No. 6, Leicester University.

Mahoney, T A and Deckop, J R (1986) 'Evolution of Concept and Practice in Personnel Administration/Human Resource Management (PA/HRM)' *Yearly Review of Management off the Journal of Management,* Vol. 12, No.2, 223-41.

Mortimer, K (1990) 'EDAP at Ford: a research note' in *Industrial Relations Journal,* Vol. 21, No. 4, pp 309-314.

Payne, J (1992), *Large Employers Survey Report,* Department of Continuing Education, University of Leeds.

Pedler, M, Boydell, T and Burgoyne, J (1988) *Learning Company Project*, Sheffield: Manpower Services Commission.

Schuler, R S and Jackson, S E (1987a) 'Linking Competitive Strategies with Human Resource Management Practices', *Academy of Management Executive,* Vol.1, No.3.

Senge, P M (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organisation,* New York: Doubleday.

Senge, P (1995) 'An Interview with Peter Senge', in *Journal of European Industrial Training,* Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 26–29.

Stacey, R D (1993) *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics,* London: Pitman.

Storey, J (1987) 'Developments in the management of human resources: an interim report. *Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations* no. 17, Warwick, November.

Storey, J (ed.) (1992) *Developments in the Management of Human Resources: an analytical review,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Taylor, C (1994) 'An Exploration of the Concept of the Learning Organisation and its Applicability within a Local Authority Social Services Department', *CLMS Annual Research Conference Paper,* September.

Taylor, F W (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management,* New York: W. W. Norton & Co. (1967 edition).

CE-085211

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC Educational Resources Information Center

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: The Learning Organisation, Part 1: The Learning Organisation: What is it? Does it Constitute a Useful Set of Tools for the Human Resource Development Practitioner	
Author(s): Jason Hughes	
Corporate Source: Centre for Labour Market Studies University of Leicester, U.K. W. Paper 29	Publication Date: 29/Dec 2000

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☑

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) *and* paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, please

Signature: B. Jennings	Printed Name/Position/Title: MS B JENNINGS, Production Manager	
Organization/Address: CLMS, University of Leicester, U.K	Telephone: 44 (0)116 2525954	FAX: 44 (0)116 2525953
	E-Mail Address: btj3@le.ac.uk	Date: 6-8-03

(Over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse: **Cheryl Grossman**
Processing Coordinator
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to: